

Embodiment and Subjectivity of Qing Femininity in *Court Ladies at Play*

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Four court ladies sit around a table covered with a red tablecloth, playing the card game in a garden surrounded by rocks, bamboo, cherry, and magnolia trees. Xu Zhuang created a scene showing women in elegant clothing relaxing while waiting for an imperial summons in *Court Ladies at Play* in 1683, Kang Xi era. As at that time it is the peak of Sinicization, women's delicate clothes are intended to evoke the courtly art of the Tang dynasty (618-906).<sup>1</sup> In order to unveil the femininity of court ladies in the late seventeenth century, this paper will explore how women clothes, background, and what they are doing embody the inheritance and uniqueness of females in the Qing dynasty in Xu's picture.

In the hanging scroll with ink and color on silk, like most artists in the Qing dynasty, Xu Zhuang overall used the obscure hue. In contrast, the bright red tablecloth, and the sporadic pure white of flowers in magnolia trees are giving the visual impact to make the picture vibrant, indicating that this elegant garden is in the imperial palace, and the identity of these women are upper-class court ladies. During the Yong Zheng and Kang Xi era in the late seventeenth century, the Qing dynasty was experiencing mercantile flourishing.<sup>2</sup> An increasing number of painters were focusing on the beautiful women for their work, especially the court ladies and courtesans, providing visible female images.<sup>3</sup> No doubt, *Court Ladies at Play* is one of the pictures showing visible women who were graceful, noble, and educated.

In 1622, the Manchu regent Prince Rui destroyed the Ming regime and established the Qing dynasty of the unified Manchu ruling class. Since Zhongyuan, also known as the Central Plains region, was firstly governed by the Manchu, the Manchu-Chinese relationship entered a new stage. The bureaucratic system, land management, military establishment, and

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang, Xu, *Court Ladies at Play*, 1683. Exhibition in Minnesota Institute of Art

<sup>2</sup> Cahill, James. "Meiren Hua: Paintings of Beautiful Women in China." *Beauty Revealed: Images of Women in Qing Dynasty Chinese Painting* (2013): 9-21.

<sup>3</sup> Ardizoni, Michela. "Unveiling the veil: Gendered discourses and the (in) visibility of the female body in France." *Women's Studies* 33, no. 5 (2004): 629-649.

culture of the Qing Dynasty were all subject to drastic changes due to the influence of the Zhongyuan, which is called the Sinicization.<sup>4</sup> In this period, especially when Kang Xi who advocated Sinicization was the emperor, the fashion of female clothes shared the similarity of Han clothes from the Tang Dynasty.

In the hanging scroll *Court Ladies at Play*, the audience could feel that similarity at first glance. The clothes four ladies wear are similar, revealing the court fashion at that time. The painter focused on the pure aesthetics of the Qing femininity underclothes: executed in rich colors in a subdued tone, their thin gauze robes expose patterned underclothes, inviting the viewer to discover the female body beneath. Long trailing dresses have loose sleeves, with exquisite decoration hung over the grundle. Same as the hairstyle of court ladies in the Tang dynasty, tall coiffures are sculptural forms embellished with flowers and jewelry.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, there are some differences between the Tang beauty of Qing beauty. Ladies in the scroll heavily powdered white faces are painted with tiny lips and fashionable thin arched eyebrows, while beautiful ladies in the Tang dynasty were always painted with small, cherry-red mouth and rosy cheekbones.<sup>6</sup> Besides, since ladies were waiting for court summons, they were wearing more conservatively, depicting by the high-cut clothes inside the dress, whereas low-cut dress was the fashion in the Tang dynasty.

In Xu's painting, ladies are playing the card game, which was a burgeoning recreation in early Qing. It is alluring that a woman strikes a beguiling pose, resting her chin in one hand. She does not pose like that on purpose, and instead, Xu Zhuang painted a moment just exuding a kind of beauty of unconstraint. Even though ladies relaxed expressions probably

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<sup>4</sup> Jian, Zhang. "Manchu Sinicization: Doubts on the Ethnic Perspective of New Qing History." *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 47, no. 1 (2016): 30-43.

<sup>5</sup> Hung, Wu. "The origins of Chinese painting (Paleolithic period to Tang dynasty)." *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. Richard Barnhart et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 61 (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Cui, Shuqin. *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 17

reveal a feeling for passing boring time, this picture still provides an angle to show what court ladies do when they were not in duty, depicting the fragrant ambiance for socializing.

As Shuqin Cui mentioned in her article that Qing beauty prefers a lovelorn lady figure, physically fragile and emotionally melancholy, it is not strange that the audience can feel ladies' lonely and bored expressions while they are relaxing.<sup>7</sup> Those court ladies were sitting among the garden rocks. The rugged rocks even became soft because of the morbidezza of ladies. Moreover, white magnolias symbolize purity and nobility, and they are also a representative of the womanly beauty and gentleness.<sup>8</sup> Court ladies had their free time for recreation and social activities, and they had a quite high social status at that time, but they would still feel the loneliness and boredom, since they were at court to serve or perform for people repeatedly day by day. In a sense, they were not totally free. Therefore, these rocks, bamboo, cherry, and magnolia trees are anthropomorphized: they and the ladies keep each other company and share each other's loneliness.

At first glance, typical court ladies in the Qing dynasty are visualized by hanging scroll *Court Ladies at Play* drawn by Zhuang Xu in 1683. More broadly, this picture speaks to the inheritance and uniqueness of femininity between the Qing and Tang dynasty, and embody fashions of both the female beauty and paintings in the Qing dynasty, through clothes, environment, and what they are doing — every component in this work.

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<sup>7</sup> Cui, Shuqin. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Welch, Patricia Bjaaland. *Chinese art: A guide to motifs and visual imagery*. Tuttle Publishing, 2013.

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